

Expectation, Christianity, and Ownership in Indigenous Hip-Hop: Religion in Rhyme with Emcee One, RedCloud, and Quese, Imc

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Abstract: The juxtaposition of the words Indians, Christianity, and hip hop frequently unearths a sense of the unexpected (Deloria 2004). This is largely because expectations are too frequently confounded by the inability to recognize the links between African- and Native American peoples, the porous boundaries between the sacred and secular, or the complex relationships between Native peoples and Christianity. This article takes a closer look at the connections between indigenous peoples, pious devotion, and subversive rhyme by describing the characteristic ways that Emcee One, Quese, and RedCloud's relationships to Christianity are inscribed, communicated, and indigenized through the lyrical messaging of modern hip-hop. These MCs in word and action loosen totalizing discourses such as the assimilation/acculturation paradigm characteristic of mid-century ethnomusicology, or its modern consequent the localization/appropriation common to contemporary discussions of global hip hop. In the rhymes presented in this article, our MCs articulate everyday strategies that express both the "already local" nature of globalized hip hop (Pennycook and Mitchell 2009) within indigenous North American communities, as well as their distinctive ownership of indigenous spiritualities.

Résumé : La juxtaposition des mots Indiens, christianisme, et hip hop suscite fréquemment un sentiment d'inattendu (Deloria 2004). Ceci est dû dans une large mesure au fait que les attentes sont trop souvent confondues par l'incapacité à reconnaître les liens entre les peuples Africains-Américains et Amérindiens, les frontières poreuses entre le sacré et le profane ou les relations complexes entre les peuples autochtones et le christianisme. Cet article examine de plus près les liens entre les peuples autochtones, la dévotion pieuse et la rime subversive en décrivant comment les relations au Christianisme de Emcee One, Quese, et RedCloud sont inscrites, communiquées et autochtonisées à travers le message lyrique du hip-hop contemporain. En paroles et en actions, ces MC assouplissent les discours totalisants tels que le paradigme de l'assimilation/acculturation caractéristique de l'ethnomusicologie du milieu du siècle

dernier, ou son successeur actuel : la localisation/appropriation, que l'on retrouve souvent dans les discussions contemporaines sur le hip-hop mondialisé. Dans les vers présentés dans cet article, nos MC articulent des stratégies quotidiennes qui expriment à la fois cette nature « déjà locale » du hip-hop mondialisé (Pennycok et Mitchell 2009) au sein des communautés autochtones d'Amérique du Nord, ainsi que le droit de propriété spécifique qui les lie aux spiritualités autochtones.

How do word combinations so confound expectation: Native Christian hip-hop.¹ A double-take is a characteristic response in my experience, when I tell friends about an upcoming interview with an MC, or even academic peers about a forthcoming article. The unexpectedness (Deloria 2004)² of these terms is not limited to non-Native response. I once proposed a university concert featuring powwow, blues, and hip-hop performances in commemoration of Native American Heritage Month. As I was communicating details of that event to a Native American Studies professor, he said that the value of the Drum and blues act aside, he did not see how hip-hop represented Native cultures. We can nevertheless move toward a reconciliation of the terms if we break them into three expectation-confounding juxtapositions.

Natives and Hip-hop

My ethnomusicological research and this paper focus on the relationship between diverse peoples and a musical form. The two phenomena placed in proximity are anomalous to some: Natives and hip-hop. This is partly due to a confusion of musical origin: hip-hop is African American, not American Indian. Yet, this article builds upon previous research I have done on the historical intersections of American Indian and African American musics and cultures (forthcoming in Rojas) and suggests that cosmopolitan Indigenous contributions to African American (and hence broader American)³ musical identity demands future research.

A related assumption confuses the connection between the terms still more: hip-hop is of the urban *ghetto*, not the rural *rez*. Even with globalization and the internet, Indians are sometimes presumed to be too pre-modern, or at least too rural, for spitting, scratching, breaking, and tagging.⁴ The unexpectedness of Native hip-hop presumes the isolation or unchanging timelessness of Native communities, thus depriving them of a sense of Indigenous modernity. Yet Indigenous understandings of Afro-Indian encounters, the comparable socio-

economic marginalization of the “hood” and “rez,” and the central place of a tough beat, of rhythm in musical aesthetic all support Indigenous ownership claims to hip-hop.

Christians and Hip-hop

Another layer further confounds expectation: the relationship between Christianity and hip-hop, between the sacred and the profane. Debate about the interplay between the weighty and light, the empowering and the comic, the sacred and profane has been important to discourses surrounding popular musical forms and Christian church music for centuries. That this debate impacts hip-hop musical production and discourse should not surprise. Christina Zanfagna, for example, explores the “contradictory connections between spiritual concerns and rap music, as well as the way African American hip-hoppers juxtapose sacred and profane imagery to articulate their responses to the basic existential questions of life and death” (2006:1). Delimitation between the sacred and secular is similarly slippery within Native America, a point reinforced by the widespread presence of trickster tales and clowns in ceremonial performance – figures in turn comedic, dangerous, revered, and sacred – who nonetheless instruct Indigenous communities on proper values and behaviour through the wisdom of their unpredictable actions. The appeal of hip-hop is not rigid adherence to one extreme or the other, but the detailed articulation of musical identity where the two concepts overlap in the performance of specific artists.

Natives and Christianity

While the politics of African-derived former slave communities sought post-reconstruction American *integration* through shared Christian values, American Indian politics stressed relationship to ancestral, or predominantly rural reservation lands, and pre-contact political *sovereignty*. Christianity was so crucial to the African American political struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the expression of the slave experience and socio-cultural marginalization in the imagery of Christian spirituals remains central to identity. Although many American Indian communities did embrace Christian theology, Christian imagery does not play an equivalent role in American Indian civil protest; it is neither a sonic index of 1960s-era political struggle, nor an emblem of idealized cultural assimilation into a broader American

culture. Rather, tribal sovereignty emphasizes cultural distinctiveness, Aboriginal preservation of land rights, and political self-determination due to the nature of treaty-ratified nation-to-nation relationships between the United States government and Indian tribes or between the Canadian government and First Nations, Métis or Inuit people. As a result, terms such as integration, assimilation, acculturation, and even the presumed correlate *Christianity* sometimes carry a negative connotation in light of Indigenous cultures and histories.

Native relationships to Christianity are consequently fraught with conflicting spiritual, intellectual, and political agendas. The study of Indigenous hymnody is notably absent in the ethnological collections and writings of the earliest generations of ethnomusicologists, in part because the music was seen as “nontraditional,” a genre imported from Europe. Ethnomusicologists Frances Densmore, Gertrude Kurath and Willard Rhodes wrote articles at mid-century on Native hymnody (Densmore 1938; Kurath 1957; Rhodes 1960), the latter making his name in the discipline by linking hymnody to the study of acculturation, or “the effect on cultures of contact with other cultures” (Rhodes 1949). Since the 1990s, scholars have slowly built a foundation for exploring the relationship between Indigenous peoples and Christian hymnody (Cavanagh 1988; Diamond 1992; Draper 1982; Giglio 1994; Lassiter 2001; Lassiter, Ellis, and Kotay 2002; McElwain 1990; McNally 1997a, 1997b; O’Grady 1991; Spinney 1996; Whidden 2007). They have begun rethinking Native appropriations of theology; the potential for Indigenous hymns as a transmitter of community language; and even Christianity and Christian song’s viability as a community-based “tradition.” Despite the increased academic interest, Indigenous communities in Oklahoma, as Quese attests in this article, are still sometimes subtly divided between “powwow people” and “church people” who continue to debate Christianity’s place in the community.

“Silences about contemporary traditions,” Beverley Diamond wrote, “often speak loudly of attitudes that implicitly freeze cultures in the past and refuse to let them grow and change” (1992:381). If there is a lack of documentation of Indigenous hymnody, there is a corresponding dearth of material on Indigenous hip-hop. Hip-hop is flourishing in Europe (Bennett 2000; Pasternak-Mazur 2009; Sciorra 2002), Asia (Lin 2009; Morelli 2001; Tsujimura and Davis 2009), Africa (Perullo 2005; Perullo and Fenn 2003), the Middle East (Solomon 2005), and across Latin America and the Caribbean (Baker 2005; Pacini and Garofalo 2005; Pardue 2010): clearly it is a global phenomenon (Alim 2008; Mitchell 2001a). And while numerous scholars have conducted studies on Indigenous hip-hop practices,⁵ the number of publications is small (Lashua 2006; Marsh 2011; Mitchell 2001b).

There are no studies of hip-hop as it relates to Indigenous relationships with Christianity, but the relationship is significant. RedCloud, the Los Angeles-based MC, linked pious devotion and subversive rhyme when he described his Indigenous background and his audiences in an interview with me: “Some of my fans would be Native. Some of my fans would be Christian. Some of my fans would just be hip-hop heads . . . A lot of all threes – I’m a Native Christian guy who likes to rap” (interview, 22 July 2011). This article describes the characteristic ways that three hip-hop artists – RedCloud, Emcee One, and Quese – inscribe, communicate, and indigenize their relationship to Christianity through the lyrical messaging of hip-hop. These MCs, in word and action, loosen totalizing discourses such as the assimilation/acculturation paradigm of mid-century ethnomusicology, or its localization/appropriation consequent in contemporary discussions of global hip-hop. In the rhymes presented in this article, these MCs articulate everyday strategies that express the “already local” nature of global hip-hop (Pennycook and Mitchell 2009) within Indigenous North American communities and exert their distinctive ownership of Indigenous spiritualities.

Music and Musicians

Musical data for the following sound and lyrical analysis was drawn from the album releases of three MCs: Emcee One’s *Collection of Demos* (2004) and *Somebody’s Gotta Tell ’em* (2006); Quese, Imc’s *Betty Lena Project* (2006), *Bluelight* (2008), and *Hand Drums for Whiskey Bottles* (2011); and RedCloud’s *Hawthorne’s Most Wanted* (2007) and *1491 Nation Presents: MC RedCloud* (2011). Lyrical analyses are also informed by personal interviews conducted with the artists in 2011, e-correspondences, and phone consultations.

These artists all know each other, their work, and their performances. Quese and Emcee One, in particular, have a close relationship as friends and performers stemming from their mutual work in the early 2000s with the Oklahoma-based hip-hop event called Culture Shock and its related touring crew, Culture Shock Camp. All three have in common a mixed Indigenous/Latino heritage, and having faced difficult economic and social issues in low-income families. Christian doctrine has played a significant role in shaping each performer’s knowledge of the world, as is evident in the social consciousness messaging of their rhyme, particularly those dealing with issues of sexuality, substance abuse, violence, oppression and dispossession, or spiritual/self-redemption. Christian morality also informs their youth outreach activities in various church, school, and tribal institutions.

Each artist, of course, marks his work with his own distinctive character and processes. The sound quality of their recordings is audibly recognizable: Quese relies primarily on digital home recording, while One and RedCloud use a professional studio. In terms of sampled music, One and RedCloud favour a more straightforward rock/funk/R&B⁶ palette, while Quese paints sound collages incorporating ethnographic vignettes, bird song, and various forms of Indigenous, Asiatic, and Latino music. Their personalities, as projected in their music, are equally distinct: One, the committed Christian/Preacher, firm in faith and eager to lead audiences to a deeper relationship with Christianity, with God; Quese, the patient Scholar/Teacher, a spokesman for worldly tolerance and Indigenous experience; and RedCloud, the metropolitan Cosmopolitan/Trickster,⁷ fuser of the sacred and profane as part comedian, part hip-hop artist, yet quietly committed Christian with a firm faith in the power of self-redemption through religious salvation.

Although this article isolates understandings of Christianity in the music of these artists, we must be careful to note that all do not necessarily consider themselves Christian artists. "I'm trying to avoid being pigeon-holed in the Native hip-hop market," RedCloud told me. "I am also trying to avoid being put in the Christian rap category. I am a hip-hop artist who happens to be Native" (interview, 22 July 2011). Although his music is marked by the influence of his youthful upbringing in the Baptist church, Quese's lyrical message is distinguished by its focus on Indigenous struggle, culture, and spirituality, and a gently personal critique of Christian ideology. This article evaluates the range of relationships these artists have developed with Christianity and the way that those relationships speak through their most recent rhyme. To define any one of the artists by one aspect of their identity (Native, Christian, rapper, among others) fails to recognize the polyphonic coincidence of their influences as they converge in music and rhyme.

But, as the example of Emcee One shows, Christian hip-hop in Indigenous communities is not a passive "effect on cultures of contact with other cultures," (Kroeber 1948:426) as Willard Rhodes' generation defined the acculturative paradigm. Indigenous mastery of Christianity and hip-hop are more a matter of an ongoing cosmopolitan adaptation (Appiah 2006; Breckenridge et al. 2002) through which Native individuals encounter the world and seize it as their own. The point here is that each artist represents a perspective on hip-hop and Christianity that speaks not only of their own experience, but of individual strategies, appropriations, and negotiations similar to those executed, won, and exchanged by the Indigenous peoples of North America over centuries.

Emcee One

Emcee One usually tells people that he is Osage/Pottawatomi/Delaware and Puerto Rican – a distinctly Oklahoman cultural diversity. His life story is a central element of his rhyme, as well as his personal and performance identity. He lived a turbulent youth in an unstable family lacking economic resources. The narrative begins with his mother, a woman of inconsistent behaviour who was haunted by memories of sexual abuse and subsequent substance abuse. One found resolution for youthful crises through Christianity. His socially conscious hip-hop aims to help other youths facing comparable difficulties by providing a model for healthy lifestyle choices and positive interpersonal relationships. He hopes to motivate in his youthful audiences their awareness of personal commitment and responsibility.

Through his rhyme and presentations, One promotes the understanding that came to him from its very absence in his life: that a family grounded in Christianity and respectful interpersonal behaviour sets the foundation for combating a plague of social ills. Nowhere is this more evident than in the five-song suite that closes out *Somebody's Gotta Tell 'em*. The first three tunes – “Hold On,” “It Almost Never Happened,” and “Mom’s Song (Keep Flying)” – begin toughly, addressing One’s family life, substance abuse, domestic violence, and (most prominently) his mother. The fourth song, “Tears (Jesus Wept),” represents a turning point in One’s life. Its lyrical message is a lament on the tragedy and toughness of daily life in which One bears witness to the value of Christianity in hard times:



Figure 1:
Emcee One in the studio

I'm trying to open their eyes, to find your purpose/What you was put on this earth with/You search, but nobody's perfect/The One that was [was perfect, i.e., Jesus] is worth it/I know at times it hurts, but realities will surface/It'll take more than church just playing church, calling it 'service' /I'm just a volunteer hollering 'til all the policies follow him/It might be hard to swallow, but I saw tears from God falling

This song is One's most detailed argument for the role of Christianity, God, and Christ in alleviating worldly pain. Marked by a gentle build in the drama of its R&B groove and orchestration, and hinting toward the resolution to his own youthful relationships to his mother, father, and the world, it moves toward a musical, narrative, and lyrical climax that concludes in the final track,



Figure 2: Emcee One in performance

“I Forgive You.”

The drama of “I Forgive You” begins with an anthemic guitar line that foreshadows the song “hook” (or melody) while floating over ethereal, sustained keyboard chords. The transcendent introductory melody slams into the gravity of One’s childhood reality as his muted, ruminating rap describes his position in the world over a cold, constricted beat (“Yo, I was mad – I wasn’t asked to come into this world/Unplanned parenthood from this bad little girl/So I stand in this land that doesn’t understand loving/Dreamed of being great, but told I’d never be nothing”).

Having drawn the listener into his personal struggle, his voice confronts the listener by moving up in pitch and doubling its previously thin and tinny timbre, heightening a sense of outrage and musical tension. A Santana-esque⁸ guitar improvisation accompanies in agitated counterpoint. He lists almost breathlessly the injustices visited upon him in youth – the violence, the drinking, the abandonment. The litany of offense builds to a boiling point as he gets to the heart of his familial tragedy: “I suppose I’m being harder than maybe I ought to be/I grew up with parents that didn’t seem smarter than me/My grandfather molested his daughter, see/[spoken in angry whisper] There’s the same blood running through these arteries.” The guitar intensifies as One’s vocal pitch rises angrily, and he describes the place of music in coping with his instability. The crescendo peaks as he releases all tension with a cathartic, profoundly Christian statement: “But, I forgive you.” The musical tension ebbs and the work concludes as One speaks with his Creator and accepts the possibility of a new life.

In the arc of a drama spread through five songs, this suite is One at his finest. It is direct in its language, “real” in its frank depictions, and without the embellishment of metaphor. One humbly executes a grand vision of revelatory hip-hop through a fusion of socially-conscious autobiography, a dash of rock concept album, and straightforward, common-man, country music-inspired narrative. He accomplishes much with little: he confronts his absent parents; describes his mother, her life, and their turbulent relationship; universalizes his pain as a reality for imperfect humans in need of guidance; and finds God and declares forgiveness in spite of it all. Nothing short of an autobiographical passion play, this tightly-wound suite of songs moves from birth, through trial and temptation, and finally toward redemption.

In rhyme, Emcee One knows who he is. Largely autobiographical in lyrical approach, he writes not as a seeker of artistic and personal identity. He already did the work. He already knows. His certainty in Christ (or Yeshua, as he also calls him) and in the power of the individual to change is for him a foundation built on religion and reinforced through personal endeavour. It

is not an understatement to say that his commitment to God, Christ (God's embodiment on earth), and the Bible (God's word) is absolute.

Absolute commitment to Christianity does not blind One to the historical and contemporary shortcomings of human faith, however. He does look at the church and its members in a more critical sense at times. In "Lukewarm II Hot," from *Collection of Demos*, he reflects on his early reactions against church outreach:

I was dared by God above to show love in my music/He said if I submitted my art form, he would use it/I argued back, exposed him to the slack that all the Christian music I had heard was wack/The fact is – I didn't know God and wouldn't search/And definitely wasn't feeling members of your church/The so-called Christians, they come by me and judge me/How could they be from a father who claimed he loved me?

One portrays himself in dialogue with the church, with God. Initially turned off by "wack" church musics (or by musicians lacking skill) and fear of judgment by church members, he reports nonetheless from the comfortable position of the redeemed sinner reflecting back upon an errant self. In "Fresh," he makes an oblique critique of the contemporary church and its music producers, who are afraid to link the subversive modern sounds of hip-hop to Godly service: "Oh my gosh – it's one of these rap guys, trying to philosophize'/I know I'm wet behind the ears/But, also beneath my eyes/Because I cry for the youth that don't recognize/That their primetime life is filled with lies/Meanwhile, the one industry that has faith is so afraid of making mistakes that they're late!" He turns up the critical volume in "Say What You Say," in which he sees sinners "running rampant" from popular media to televangelism: "Everybody got something to say/Lips be writing checks that their back can't pay/Even some church folk tell me to pray/But I wonder if they spell it with an 'e' or an 'a' – hey!"

The strongest critique of church history, practice, and orthodoxy comes in the song "I Am Sorry." Built upon the guitar part of Extreme's early-90s rock ballad, "More Than Words," the verses address first men, then women, then bring together the listeners-as-congregation to confront difficult facts. He narrows his audience to the Native communities and youth he frequently serves:

I'm sorry to you people whose lives have always been facing/
Hardship and struggle growing up on reservations/I'm sorry to

you Natives and everybody tribal/For all the massacres done by
men holding a Bible/It's vital that the church represent the real/
Even when it goes against the way we look and feel/The deal is,
I apologize for every single slave/That was given a false gospel to
assure that he'd behave. (2006)

While the influence of Christianity is often tacitly understood as a valued cultural expression in terms of African American experience, it is in contrast often viewed as suspect in Native experience. The healthy skepticism often shared by scholars and some community members is due in part to awareness of the link between religious conversion and the military, bureaucratic, and intellectual colonization of Indigenous peoples by an alien or dominant power. One resolves the intellectual tension for himself by saying, "God uses imperfect people to do his perfect will" (personal communication, 6 June 2011). He sees historical violence not as the fault of a perfect God that has come so that humans might "have life, and a more abundant life," but as the result of imperfect human action in a corrupt "fallen" world and an evil manifested by those "without a relationship to Him."

Perhaps even more important to One's relationship with Christianity is his understanding of the religion as essentially Indigenous in origin. A recurring gloss among scholars, community members, and others who assert essentialized differences between the "West" and its North American "Other" (i.e., Native North Americans) is that Western peoples are "individual" or concerned with the self, while Indigenous people think more in terms of community and relationships between people. Juxtaposing "west" and "other," self and community, modernist present and natural origins, One affirmed his grasp of the paradigm when discussing his duty as a role model for Native youth when he wrote to me:

In our Native world, we are in such need for solid leadership,
[for] presenters that will choose what's best for the youth over
what feels good at the time. The divide is over the mindset:
[some people might say] "people can just live however." That's our
problem – people are already living "however" with no regard on
how it implicates others. At its core, this is NOT an indigenous
mindset. This is as "western" as it gets . . . An indigenous mindset
always calculates its repercussions on others: not a "me" mindset,
but a "we" mindset.

He sees Christianity as representing key Indigenous values. The Bible, he

argues, chronicles a tribal people:

Read it without any of the blue eye imagery given to it by those with the same eyes [and] ...in mind of a tribal people. It radically affects the context to the content... In his humanity Jesus was a tribal man, (tribe of Judah), from a deeply traditional background. His people's land had been taken by another government. He came from a place people said, "no good can come from there." He was rejected by his own. He was beaten, and he died violently. In humanity his story is so native, so tribal, so rez-life, statistically. Humility, honour, honesty, integrity, valour, self-control, wisdom, respect for elders, a heart of protective stewardship instead of ownership, concept of "we" over "me," *are all* both biblical and all tribal concepts. (Personal communication, 13 July 2011)

One both universalizes Christianity (making it applicable and appealing to broad masses of people) and simultaneously "Indigenizes" it so that it represents a return "home," a return to "tradition" for Natives such as himself. It is perhaps an easy (and often immediate) response to assume that Christian practices in Native communities are the result of coercion or imposition. But that assumption lacks a sense of Indigenous agency or subversion, and therefore does not go far in explaining the ways that Native people seize, mark distinctively, appropriate, and own traditions that others consider alien to them.

RedCloud

RedCloud is an MC of Huichol-Mexican descent raised in Hawthorne, California (near Compton) in the eighties and early nineties. The son of a teen mother, he was raised by a surrogate father, who was in a gang called Redondo 13. His brothers were in the gang Lawndale 13. RedCloud was jumped (initiated) into the Little Watts gang when he was in the sixth grade. He was attending a Los Angeles-area middle school when he was moved by a hip-hop assembly performed by former gang members who delivered tragic testimony of gang life, and urged peace over violence. Their message resonated with him, so he attended a free concert held by these performers the following Friday – at a church. There he became a student of scripture and began honing his skills as an MC with the hope of affecting young lives in the way his had been changed. Having come of age in Los Angeles in the heyday of

gangster (gangsta) rap, his music might be described, in all its unexpectedness, as “gangster gospel, with an Indigenous twist” (personal communication, 28 March 2012). He carries his music and message to local L.A. club stages, throughout the nation, and most notably on his reverse commutes to hungry Indigenous audiences in the four-corners area of the American southwest (the area where the borders of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah meet, and home to significant Indigenous populations; especially on the Navajo, Hopi, and Ute reservations); Oklahoma; Ontario, Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Toronto in Canada; and the Pacific Northwest and Northern Plains.

RedCloud has a quiet certainty in his relationship to God. In an interview about the school assembly that led him out of gang life, he spoke matter-of-factly. “I’d never seen anything like [that assembly]. And I think God made it just for me” (interview, 22 July 2011). When I asked whether his life, marked by a broken home, substance abuse, and violence, provided him with experience to draw upon for his work with reservation communities, he replied, “I’ve been blessed with that testimony.” Speaking of his youthful arrests and the loss of friends to gang violence, he said calmly, almost in passing, “God has blessed me with my story.” His relationship to God guided him for the decade he performed and recorded on the faith-based record label Syntax. He is not a grandstanding proselytizer in person, nor on any of the four records he released on the label. He is not preachy. But the impact of Christianity is an undertone, subtly (even gracefully) encoded in speech and rhyme as a distinct but never imposed presence. The ease and sincerity of his statements of faith give the impression of someone confident of where he stands.

While clear in commitment, RedCloud’s orthodoxy is distinct. In July 2009, after nearly a decade together, Syntax Records decided to “indefinitely suspend all promotion, support, and endorsement of RedCloud due to what we consider ‘Substance Abuse’” (Trudeau 2009). Citing the Bible, Syntax condemned RedCloud’s use of marijuana as a “deed of the flesh” that “sets itself against the spirit.” The split between artist and label arose from the murky intersection where state law, national law, and Christian morality diverge. The conflict became fodder for internet debate and for introspection, and it took a toll on the artist. In April 2010, RedCloud fanned the flames of internet chatter with a video and song on YouTube called “Evandalism,” addressing his legal (in California) substance use and the duplicity he perceived in Christian judgment of his actions. But he then felt remorse for “Evandalism” and removed it from the internet.

He has since moved on with his life. While his final record with the Syntax label, *Hawthorne’s Most Wanted*, might be described as West Coast Holy

Hip Hop, his recent independent release *1491 Nation Presents: MC RedCloud* is more secular in lyrical focus, widely appealing in overall messaging, and has heavy Indigenous emphasis in the short narrative skits that link the songs as an album. “Yellow Maserati” is perhaps the best representation of RedCloud’s post-Syntax independence. Sampling Wiz Khalifa’s “Black and Yellow,” “Maserati’s” lyrics are entirely secular: “Flying down the highway in a yellow Maserati/Bumping ‘ladi-dadi, like to party/No trouble, bother nobody’/Pulling out my snap-back and I’m packing up my fitted/And it feels so splendid to be rendered independent, independent.” The song for the most part describes RedCloud’s sense of renaissance following the wake of the split with his record label, in which he fantasizes about blowing down the L.A. freeways blasting Doug E. Fresh and Ricky-D’s “Ladi-Dadi.” The rhyme has for the most part an optimistic, forward looking sensibility, though there is some exploration in the change (or musical break) of the sense of dread that might describe his doubts about musical independence (“I walk with a hop and a skip through the rubble, sift in search for the popular gift”). The lyrics also connect his personal dreams of independence in a more universal sense with a working class struggling to make ends meet (“But now I sit and scour those pots and pans for hours, Bro/Daydream about that in-between, where the loot devours, yo”).

RedCloud’s post-Syntax sound suits him. *1491 Nation* blends recognizable, accessible, grooveable samples and lyrical references with a full-bodied West Coast sound marked by a driving bass end – he has never sounded better on record. The album highlights the virtuosity of his crisply enunciated “chop,” or rapid-fire delivery of lyrical flow on “Birthday Suit” or “Yellow Maserati” (try it: set your metronome quarter-note to 79 and practice your 32nd-note enunciation while rapping, “I’m smitten like a kitten when I’m spitting out the written, quick-witted when I’m pitted up against the grain”). He also seems liberated to unleash his inner-Cypress Hill (Cypress Hill is a California-based hip-hop crew known as advocates for the legalization and use of marijuana) and address marijuana use throughout the album, including on the tracks “100 Cholos” (fictionally), “One Hitta Quitta” (playfully), and “Aquanet” (seriously).

In his post-Syntax artistic rehabilitation, it might be argued that RedCloud’s focus has turned toward the “me,” toward his “independence.” Virtuoso chop is an impressive feat, but it obscures lyrical meaning to the ear, subordinating message to technique. Referential drug use is interesting as he toys with hip-hop convention (through descriptive fiction, indulgent hip-hop irreverence, and message “consciousness”). But adept manipulation of genre is all part of the shape-shifting capacities of an individual artist, rather than

any specific social community. Long-time listeners might be confounded that RedCloud might have veered toward the church of secularism. During the time he was a weekly entertainer at the 1616 Club in Los Angeles, he gave me his perspective on “the club” as a place for the encounter of the sublime, for spiritual reflection:

But, the club – the club is the club, man. Because to me, it’s almost like another version of church. People are hurting. People are having a tough day. People are having a tough life. And they are going there and they are meeting there and they are all fellowshiping there to feel better. It’s almost a version of church – I can just walk in and make them feel better . . . make them happy, you know. I could feel like they do and feel sympathetic to their needs and entertain them. I love the club. (Interview, 22 July 2011)

Each point speaks to a “me.” Yet, a time of personal healing might be the very time an individual needs to emphasize the self.

There is nonetheless a multi-layered “we” threaded through the album that has been consistent since his early recordings. It is a “we” that addresses the general audiences and hip-hop heads who can track the album’s sample sources and lyrical references; understand the articulation of its hybrid hip-hop, classic rock, and metal origins; and decode lyrical meaning so as to give its often broad messages coherent meaning. The “we” also addresses the Indigenous peoples of North America in its topic matter, rapped “shout-outs,” and particularly in the off-beat humour of the skits that connect its diverse parts. Although tempered in comparison to earlier releases, the “we” also addresses Christian sentiments, obliquely in “God Gave Rock and Roll to You” and more directly in “Get Tribal.” The latter explores the borderlands between the sacred and secular through cinematic narrative about hallucinogenic mushroom use at the Bellagio Casino in Las Vegas, with coda by the featured artist Getel shouting out the values of the past and decrying the violence of the present: “Times change/Values remain the same/1491 is the gang/Keep up the slang/Cross on my chest/Don’t need to [gang] bang.”

This is the intersection where hip-hop, Indigenous peoples, and Christianity make sense. It is the space where Zanfagna argues that African American hip-hop draws the sacred and profane into proximity. Hip hop scholar Imani Perry calls it the “reunion space” (2004:4-5) where, despite the mingling of the “respectable” and “funky,” there is still “no mandate on the [hip-

hop] artist to be politically uplifting all the time, or even, at all" (2004:41). This interplay between the oppositional, but ultimately interrelated poles of the sacred and profane, Zanfagna argues, in a strictly African American context, reflects "the explosive hybridity and 'trickster' nature of hip-hop culture, often embodied in African American folklore as the divine trickster, Esu Elegba. Hip-hop's spirituality – its mystical allusions, contradictory images, and profaned exterior – can be 'tricky,' and elusive to the outsider not borne of or 'baptized' in the streets (2006:3).

Ascribing the mix of sacred and secular to African American origins is apt – particularly in terms of hip-hop – and gives hip-hop a deep connection to musical and spiritual traditions in diasporic African-derived consciousness. But given the history of Native and African Americans from the colonial period to the present, American historical memory would be well-served to at least consider that Indigenous peoples and their coyote trickster tales might be an equally applicable New World influence, if not an overlay on the African-derived traditions that feed hip-hop. Jonathan Brennan notes that many Native American nations (predominantly southeastern, including the Cherokee, Creek, Natchez, Hitchiti, Seminole, Potowatomi, Alabama, and Koasati) display in their mythological systems a hybrid African-Native origin (2003:17). Not many scholars have followed this thread in the historical and cultural analysis of African American experience, and twentieth-century scholarship was spotty at best (Jones 2001); but there is recent renewed interest in the cultural syntheses of Afro-Indian relations (Miles and Holland 2006).

Vacillation between sin and faith has a storied history in rock-and-roll; Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Prince (to name a few) sing of nightlife, streets, sexuality, and sin followed by a return to Christian principles. Follow the path back and you find Nina Simone's blues "sinner man" – a double-minded man, as the Christian tradition might call it, living in sin and seeking redemption – or the redeemed fallen into sin as a result of hard luck. A little farther back you might find roots in the African trickster Esu-Elegba. But that would be to deprive African American traditions of the elements that make them truly American: their steeping in indigenous North American ways, knowledge, and musical forms. While musical scholars have been remiss in failing to advance analysis of Afro-Indian musical exchange, scholars in anthropology and literature have been slightly more active in evaluating Afro-Indigenous intersections in terms of the trickster – that ambiguous, shape-shifting epic spider/raven/rabbit/turtle/deer/coyote Indigenous inverter of the sacred and profane.

Quese, Imc

Quese is a Pawnee/Seminole raised in the southern Baptist and Seminole “Indian” churches of Wewoka, Oklahoma. In contrast to One and RedCloud, Quese’s music reflects an ambiguous relationship to Christianity. In “Make It Big,” from *Bluelight*, he reveals the influence of his mother on his religion: “My mom always told me to be the same/But grow in a way that forever evolved/ ‘Don’t forget God,’ my Mom would say/If you wanna know me get to know my mom/she made me calm and made me strong” (2007). This statement, of course, does not specify *which* God his mother urges him to remember, but the extent of her influence on Quese and the identity of her intended creator might be clarified a little on a subsequent track, “Greencorn,” which begins, with Quese urging “Yo, mom – sing this,” as he provides a vocal lead for a Seminole Christian church hymn.

But in other tunes, such as “I Am My Ancestors,” Quese uses snippets of ethnographic interviews with Indigenous peoples to critique Christianity as a tool of colonization. His introduction to “Loose Cannons” on *Betty Lena* has a seemingly tongue-in-cheek snippet of the wholesome, country-inflected version of “I Saw the Light” (“I wandered an aimless life filled with sin/I wouldn’t let my poor savior in”). Recalling that the Culture Shock hip-hop event had overtones of Christian ideology, or at least a sense of spirituality, I asked Quese if he could clarify his relationship to the religion. He said:

We all grew up in Oklahoma. So, growing up in Oklahoma, you grow up going to church – whether it’s southern Baptist (hard-core “this is the only way,” fire and brimstone, “pits of hell if you don’t believe this way”) or Catholicism. I grew up in church. I was taught to believe something out of fear. (Interview, 17 June 2011)

He nonetheless maintains respect for Christianity: “I’m not saying that Christianity isn’t the right way because if you find peace in a way of thinking . . . and it helps you in life – that’s what’s beautiful about finding prayer and finding yourself.” For himself, however, “Christianity was brought to me out of fear. I was brought into it in the feeling that if I didn’t believe in this, I was going to burn. So, I believed that for a time.”

One event proved particularly influential in Quese’s spiritual development in the Christian churches of central Oklahoma:

I was always into [Native] ceremonies and culture [too]. I was like, “Yeah, we’re going to go to a sweat, [or] we’re going to go to

a peyote meeting.” And somebody came up to me – and it was a Native – and they said, “You know, you shouldn’t go to those . . . because you don’t know what kind of evil spirits you are going to allow into your body, into your spirit.” And I went, “What – evil spirits?! At a sweat? In a Teepee?” [The unnamed Native continued] “Yeah, you shouldn’t go to powwows because there are a lot of evil spirits around that.” And I couldn’t believe it – my own people told me that. And I thought, “Wait a minute – I don’t believe that because I feel it with my spirit.” (Ibid.)

This struck Quese, it seems, as an invasive internal colonization, a defect at the foundation of theology, rather than the failure of individual action. As a result, he “slowly began to come out of it.”

Quese reflects on Christianity in “Little Marcus,” which documents his fear of the Christian “lake of fire” (the afterlife where sinners spend eternity) and rote adherence to practice: “Every day they would ask me if I was okay, if I needed to pray/Man, give me a break!/Preacher man, laying hands/But they really pushed me down/So, I gave them a courtesy fall/Then thought: ‘Why am I on the ground!?’/‘Get up, Quese, this isn’t your way!’” (2007). His solution to his spiritual dilemma was a return to tribal roots. Listing a range of Indigenous beliefs from the Sun Dance, to sweat lodges, to his own Seminole tribal tradition, he raps: “So now, ask me to wear a mask? – I’ll pass/Feeling good about my people/Connecting, at last/And we fast, every chance we get/We pierce, break sweat and never forget/See you at Greencorn on the day when we connect and the spirits reflect.” He provides a concise, playful summary of his position on Christian doctrine: “So don’t try to convert me unless it’s an MP3/Search engine Quese, Imc and download my music for free.”

In the course of his spiritual evolution, Quese turned his attention to his Pawnee and Seminole heritage and their creators (Atias Tirawahat and Ofvnka), and the iconography of their ceremonials (stars and corn). He drew inspiration from the Greencorn ceremonials of the Seminole, telling me:

What I realize in that [Seminole] belief is that this world isn’t real . . . We have gifts and we have obligations to fulfill those gifts and operate out of those gifts and bring healing to the people here . . . And then we go to the spirit world. But, while we are here [on earth], that [spirit] world can come to us and we can go to it. And in that, it’s not compartmentalized. It’s open – meaning that our understanding of that comes in time. And it won’t be

until we leave this earth that we understand . . . that we are that. This way of life, this belief is a way of peace; of finding peace, of having peace, *true* peace in your spirit and mind . . . Because if you have peace, you become the greatest warrior. (Interview, June 17, 2011)

Quese's songs are sprinkled with lyrical and sampled musical references to the practices of Greencorn, an annual ceremonial that includes the gathering of community for music and dance, fasting and feasting, and prayer. From his Pawnee heritage, he takes a reverence for the stars:

And then the stars – the stars control war and peace. But, a great warrior man or woman become the greatest warriors of all because they understand that peace is the foundation; rather than somebody who is a great warrior but doesn't know peace . . . So if we operate out of that peace that comes from the stars, and the stars get it from the creator Atias Tirawahat/Ofvnka, we can have some sort of connection to that. Because of our makeup – our elemental makeup in our body – we have some of the same elements as stars within us. We have some of the same makeup as corn. And we go back to that understanding that we are connected to all of these things, then these creations will talk to us . . . not in this realm, but in another realm. But that is how we learn. And it is exciting. (Interview, 17 June 2011)

Pawnee lives and earth-lodge homes were historically attuned to the night skies. Quese's songs are in this tradition filled with imagery of the stars. "Superbrightstar," for example, teases in its juxtaposition of worldly, sustained mid-century female country vocal harmonies (sampled from Bobby Goldsboro's "Honey" [1968]) and the otherworldly, George Clinton-inspired nature of the sung hook and lyrical content that might be mistaken for the braggadocio of a cocksure front man: "I'm going to be a star/Watch out cause here we are/Took a journey past Mars/Just to get to where you are/We're on the radio/We're on the speaker waves/In stereo, here we are today" (2006). The metaphorical third verse, however, betrays a sense of humility and the idea that hip-hop "stardom" might mean something else: "I'm just a minute individual living in a little off-white house on 85th/Drinking myths and two fifths away from receiving gifts/A gorilla in the mist/Buffalo in the distance/And a finished sentence/Puzzle piece missing/I'm a star." The tune is multi-layered in its play on rock/hip-hop aspirations

of stardom (as would be more appropriate to the hip-hop idiom) versus being a star (celestial bodies like planets and stars, as in the Pawnee star people). Then there is “Morningstar” (“Because this is bundle music for the morning star/I’ve got an earth lodge to build once the album is dropped/Taking it back to the ceremonial ways of my pops/You can buy the CD, but culture can’t be bought” [2007]) and “The Youth Conference” (“No wonder we rise/Because we relate to stars” [2007]).

Quese sees humans linked to stars as lights in this world: “music is a tool that I have in the palm of my hand that I use as the light to shine on it, because *I’m* a light. And, I’ll continue to shine only because they move through me. And that is the only way that I shine – they move through me and I become that human hollow bone here on earth, to be used” (interview, 17 June 2011). The hollow bone (often equated with hollowed wood) is, for Quese,

...[the] conduit . . . the in-between that comes from the star people, the creator. It goes through that and it comes out to this world. Our instruments are like that – they’re powerful . . . The hollow bone, the hollow wood is who we are. And that makes us lights in this world. We are given those gifts, and those gifts are powerful. Those gifts can bring light to what we want to shine light on. (Ibid.)

In Pawnee tales, the interior of hollowed wood and bone is a place for the manifestation of and encounter with spiritual power (Dorsey 1906), a spiritual metaphor that mirrors the fact that the core of trees (the xylem, or sapwood) and the bone (the marrow) both animate the life of the vessel. The hollowed bone imagery appears in rhyme, as well, in Quese’s “Life So Great”:

Knowledge and music
The way we use this instrument and move through it
Like a hollow bone, hollow wood, hallowed earth
Sending messages to the future
So we call it work, through this gift of words
That beams like light into the stars
An alternate balance to the chaos and the wars
And the people are standing up and the earth is shaking
And those chosen are awakened from frequencies and vibrations
(2011)

Quese's lyrical language is often highly metaphorical and one might assume that it is simply playful in its colors, or abstract and open to individual interpretation. In some cases this is true. But there are also instances in which the artist speaks clearly and specifically, drawing upon valued tribal religious concepts.

Conclusion

Indigenous modernities come in variety, as the examples in this article attest. Although Quese's record debut displayed indicators of Christian influence, his work since *The Betty Lena Project* (2004) reconnects with the sovereignty of Indian experience, rather than a fully integrative, or intentionally cosmopolitan *religious* position. In his rhyme, Quese portrays himself as an individual open to Christian theology, but skeptical of its intent due to a perceived incompatibility between the powwow and the church still sometimes evident in Oklahoma's Indian communities.

Los Angeles-based RedCloud represents a borderland negotiator, an identity configuration useful in situating self, or making "home" in the presence of diverse urban and reservation audiences. Operating betwixt and between hip-hop, spiritual, and cultural identities, he provokes audiences through his juxtapositions of the sacred and secular. His work evokes the parallel histories of American Indian and African American experience in the United States. The broad applicability of the trickster is a reminder of the malleability of hip-hop by Indigenous and other peoples worldwide.

In contrast, One seizes Christianity through an appropriative process – for him, Christianity is tribal, not modern; "we," not "me"; and it is evidence of triumph in the encounter of violence and oppression under Roman colonization. He indigenizes religion through hip-hop in a way that exerts personal ownership over its articulation and meaning in his life.

As a social scientific term, *acculturation* once attempted to shed light on issues of culture change, defining the acculturative process as one marked by the acquisition of traits or a change in the cultural behavior and thinking of a group as the result of contact with another culture. Applied to Indigenous North Americans, it implies a centre-periphery conflict of hegemonic, non-Indigenous dominance which in its original mid-century sense implied *assimilation* of the "vanishing Indian." On first glance I see two issues. The acculturation paradigm fails to ask: In what way might a proportionally smaller population group make a significant impact upon

the cultural character of a place, region, nation, or musical form assumed to be dominated by larger populations? Second, acculturation evokes issues of culture change, but describes cultural change as an abstract process without actors; it treats the exchange of influence or traits as happening between groups, rather than among identifiable individual human agents. But as Timothy Rice notes in the *Grove* dictionary entry on acculturation, by the 1970s ethnomusicologists turned their attention away from issues of acculturation as “interest in positing such general laws declined” (2001). It is surely an older paradigm, a static framework ill-fitted for understanding modern Indigenous communities.

Today, connection to geographic *place* (Basso 1996; Feld and Basso 1996), that is, to a shared land base, remains important in studies of music and cultural identity (Samuels 2004; Jacobsen 2009). But scholars increasingly view the construction of culture through shared social *space* as pre-eminent over relationships to physical places (Jacobsen 2009), such as the urban ghetto or rural *rez*. We must recognize that modern North American Indigenous identities are often characterized by a sense of exile, diaspora, and cosmopolitanism (Clifford 2007).

In his work on Navajo country, David Samuels provides a characterization of hip-hop’s function that is equally useful for understanding hip-hop’s global identity: “If the rock voice is about rebellion, the reggae voice about protest, and the hip hop voice about preaching truth, then the country voice is about memory” (2008:155). Samuels’ characterization of hip-hop’s message as “preaching” is appropriate to the idiom. I would add that preaching is a form of expression that, through analogy, draws upon sacred, past tense storytelling with the assumption that the historical lesson – the “truth” – conveyed is an enduring model for the present and future.

Indigenous appropriations of hip-hop are equally about admonishing Native youth to connect the past to the future, or to “fight like them warriors/ And expand on intellect,” as Cynthia Smallboy of War Party once put it (War Party 2000). Quese, RedCloud, and One accomplish this by fusing aspects of Indigenous sovereignty, history and practice, and spiritual philosophy to contemporary musical forms in a manner that either seeks the uniqueness of Indigenous authorship (as in Quese’s return to tradition or RedCloud’s trickster-like transcendence of conventional boundary) or the articulation of distinctive ownership (as with One and the Indigeneity of Christianity). 🍀

Notes

1. I use several terminologies throughout this article in reference to the native peoples of North America: Indigenous, Native American, American Indian, and Indian. The term *Indigenous* in this article's title communicates a modern international consciousness seen in various forms throughout the world and in recognition of the international readership that *MUSICultures* represents to me, an American author. Because my work and claims are based upon my own work and research in Oklahoma and Los Angeles, I typically rely upon "Native American" (a terminology still employed at the University of Oklahoma), or "American Indian" (more common in my previous work with the University of California, Los Angeles) to specify musical origin. The gloss Indian or Native is used on occasion to describe some aspect of a more colloquial intertribal Indian life, particularly in Oklahoma. Afro-Indian is the terminology that I currently employ to denote hybrid cultural products created at the intersection of Native American and African American peoples, largely historical in sensibility, in either the nineteenth-century American southeast, or in late nineteenth, or early twentieth-century Oklahoma.

2. I use the terms *expectation*, *anomaly*, and *unexpected* in this article in the spirit advanced by Deloria in *Indians in Unexpected Places* (2004). *Expectation* describes the way in which American popular culture "works to produce – and sometimes to compromise – racism and misogyny" (11). Dominant colonial assumptions prevail when a sense of "the *anomalous*" reinforces widespread *expectations* of Indigenous peoples and their relationships with modernity. Rather than focus on the *anomalous*, then, Deloria emphasizes "the *unexpected*," or the ways that individuals through their actions resist categorization and question assumptions.

3. I agree with Mitchell's contention in *Global Noise* that many non-African American forms evident around the globe, such as Indigenous hip-hop, are too frequently assumed to be a "derivative outgrowth of an African American-owned idiom" (2001a:11). African American innovation was fundamental in the development of the blues, jazz, rock, and hip-hop. I suggest that American Indian music, history, and consciousness have also been a significant influence on the construction of modern African American musical and cultural identities.

4. That is, for practicing the four elements of hip-hop culture: MC-ing, DJ-ing, break dancing, or practicing the "aerosol arts" of graffiti.

5. Research on Indigenous hip-hop has been advanced by scholars such as Tony Mitchell (University of Technology, Sydney [Australia]); Charity Marsh (University of Regina [Canada]); Brett Lashua (University of Liverpool [UK]); Adam Krims (University of Nottingham [UK]); Elyse Carter Vosen (College of St. Scholastica [US]); Neal Ullestad (Pima Community College), among others.

6. R&B, or "rhythm and blues," is a term that encompasses numerous African American- associated music genres. Here, it refers more specifically to those

popular American genres of the 70s to the present, based on the funk/soul style.

7. Metropolitan is used in a dual sense, here, as both an urban citizen of the metropolis and – akin to the “metropolitan” bishops of Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican practice – as an advocate of Christian theology. Although the artist prefers the tribal specificity and respectability of the Lakota *Iktomi*, the author has relied on the more universal, social scientific rubric “trickster,” in a similarly dual sense: to highlight the contrast of the artist’s comedic hip-hop persona in relation to the contrasting moral weight of his social consciousness rhyme.

8. That is, akin to timbral sound and pentatonic improvisational style of the guitarist Carlos Santana.

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